



MINORITY VIEW

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The charge from Congress to the National Reading Panel (NRP) was to “assess the status of research-based knowledge, including the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching children to read.” In explicating that charge, the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), which convened the Panel, listed seven questions for the Panel to address. They were:

1. What is known about the basic processes by which children learn to read?
2. What are the most common instructional approaches in the United States to teach children to learn to read? What are the scientific underpinnings for each of these methodologic approaches, and what assessments have been done to validate their underlying scientific rationale? What conclusions about the scientific basis for these approaches does the Panel draw from these assessments?
3. What assessments have been made of the effectiveness of each of these methodologies in actual use in helping children develop critical reading skills, and what conclusions does the Panel draw from these assessments?
4. Based on the answers to the preceding questions, what does the Panel conclude about the readiness for implementation in the classroom of these research results?
5. How are teachers trained to teach children to read, and what do studies show about the effectiveness of this training? How can this knowledge be applied to improve this training?
6. What practical findings from the Panel can be used immediately by parents, teachers, and other educational audiences to help children learn to read, and how can the conclusions of the Panel be disseminated most effectively?
7. What important gaps remain in our knowledge of how children learn to read, the effectiveness of different instructional methods for teaching reading, and improving the preparation of teachers in reading instruction that could be addressed by additional research?

From this charge, it seems reasonable to infer that Congress’s goal was to settle the “Reading Wars,” putting an end to the inflated rhetoric, partisan lobbying, and uninformed decisionmaking that have been so widespread and so detrimental to the progress of reading instruction in America’s schools. Clearly, the main thrust of the charge is toward determining which of the many teaching methods used in schools, and promoted by advocates, really work best.

Whether a review of the existing reading research literature could have provided answers to all of Congress’s questions, the Panel’s obligation was to dig in and find out. I am filing this minority report because I believe that the Panel has not fulfilled that obligation. From the beginning, the Panel chose to conceptualize and review the field narrowly, in accordance with the philosophical orientation and the research interests of the majority of its members. At its first meeting in the spring of 1998, the Panel quickly decided to examine research in three areas: alphabets, comprehension, and fluency, thereby excluding any inquiry into the fields of language and literature. After some debate, members agreed to expand their investigations to two other areas: computer-linked instruction and teacher preparation. Five subcommittees were formed, and within the chosen areas, each selected a number of topics of interest. As work on the initial choices of topics proceeded, however, it became apparent that the Panel had insufficient time and support personnel to cover all it had identified. Ultimately, the Panel subgroups produced reviews of the research on the following topics: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension strategies, vocabulary development,



computer technology and reading instruction, teacher preparation in general, and teacher preparation to teach comprehension strategies. In addition, the Panel developed a set of criteria and procedures for evaluating reading studies, which all subgroups used and which the Panel hopes will serve as future guidelines for other researchers.

These reviews show comprehensive and painstaking work by the subcommittees. They will prove valuable, I think, to other experimental researchers as they seek to expand the body of knowledge on those topics and fill in the gaps. On the other hand, the reviews are of limited usefulness to teachers, administrators, and policymakers because they fail to address the key issues that have made elementary schools both a battleground for advocates of opposing philosophies and a prey for purveyors of “quick fixes.” And, unfortunately, the reviews are of even less use to parents because they do not touch on early learning and home support for literacy, matters which many experts believe are the critical determinants of school success or failure.

To have properly answered its charge, the Panel had to look at the field of reading both horizontally and vertically, examining the basic theoretical models of reading, the methods that grow out of them, and the processes of learning that begin in infancy and continue through young adulthood. (See Appendix A for definitions and descriptions of the three models underlying methods of instruction in American schools today.) The scientific basis for each of these models needed to be examined, then the effectiveness of the methods they have generated. The research on language development, pre-reading literary knowledge, understanding of the conventions of print, and all the other experiences that prepare young children to learn to read also demanded the Panel’s attention. And finally, the changing needs and strategies of adolescent readers called for a review of the existing research.

If the Panel could not cover the whole field—as, in fact, it could not because of time and resource limitations—it should have concentrated on topics of highest interest and controversy in the public arena. Or, as professionally distasteful as the task might have been, it should have assessed the validity of the claims of various commercial programs being sold as cure-alls to

schools and parents. (In order to be specific about topics the panel did not cover, I have included two lists in Appendix B.) The panel chose not to pursue any of these approaches.

Furthermore, to have fully answered its charge, the Panel needed to assess the implications for practice growing out of research findings. As a body made up mostly of university professors, however, its members were not qualified to be the sole judges of the “readiness for implementation in the classroom” of their findings or whether the findings could be “used immediately” by parents, teachers, and other educational audiences.” Their concern, as scientists, was whether or not a particular line of instruction was clearly enough defined and whether the evidence of its experimental success was strong. What they did not consider in most cases were the school and classroom realities that make some types of instruction difficult—even impossible—to implement. Outside teacher reviewers should have been brought in to critique the Panel’s conclusions, just as outside scientists were to critique its processes. Despite repeated suggestions that this be done, it was not.

In fairness to the Panel, it must be recognized that the charge from Congress was too demanding to be accomplished by a small body of unpaid volunteers, working part time, without staff support, over a period of a year and a half. (The time Congress originally allotted was only 6 months.)

Congress did not realize—and the Panel itself did not fully comprehend at the beginning of its labors—how large, uneven, and intractable the field of reading research really is. The Panel’s preliminary electronic searches of databases uncovered thousands of articles on some topics, hundreds on others, only a handful on some. Their completed reviews on several topics disclosed that the critical question of generalizability (i.e., Does a skill or strategy taught and learned carry over to new experiences?) often was not answered by researchers. The reviews show, in addition, that questions relevant to the success of an instructional technique, such as “how much” to teach and “when,” were not even examined in most studies.

Also in fairness to the Panel, I must acknowledge that a few of the topics I have identified as neglected are included in some of the reports. Still, they receive only peripheral attention when public interest demands much more. In the review on phonemic awareness, for example, the critical question of whether all children need special training in phonemic awareness was not addressed, even though several studies suggest that many children grasp the concept and are able to apply it through ordinary reading instruction. Other topics of interest, such as students' need for "direct instruction," appear in reviews only as assumptions about successful practices, but are never tested against their philosophical opposites.

In the end, the work of the NRP is not of poor quality; it is just unbalanced and, to some extent, irrelevant. But because of these deficiencies, bad things will happen. Summaries of, and sound bites about, the Panel's findings will be used to make policy decisions at the national, state, and local levels. Topics that were never investigated will be misconstrued as failed practices. Unanswered questions will be assumed to have been answered negatively. Unfortunately, most policymakers and ordinary citizens will not read the full reviews. They will not see the Panel's explanations about why so few topics were investigated or its judgments that the results

of research on some of the topics are inconclusive. They will not hear the Panel's calls for more and more fine-tuned research. Ironically, the report that Congress intended to be a boon to the teaching of reading will turn out to be a further detriment.

As an educator with more than 40 years of experience and as the only member of the NRP who has lived a career in elementary schools, I call upon Congress to recognize that the Panel's majority report does not respond to its charge nor meet the needs of America's schools. In spite of the Panel's diligent efforts and its valuable findings on a select number of instructional practices, we still cannot answer the first and most central question of the charge: "What is known about the basic processes by which children learn to read." We still do not know what types of instruction are suitable for different ages and populations of children. We still do not know the relative effectiveness of the three models of reading as bases for instruction. We do not even know whether the existing body of research can answer those questions. Therefore, I ask Congress not to take actions that will promote one philosophical view of reading or constrain future research in the field on the basis of the Panel's limited and narrow set of findings.



Appendix A

Definitions

Word Identification Model of Reading

The word identification model hypothesizes that readers read by matching letters to sounds, then blending sounds into pronounceable words. In asserting that children who have mastered the skills of decoding “can read anything,” it separates word pronunciation from word understanding and defines the former as reading. Instructional materials evade the issue by using mostly decodable words in stories that reflect familiar life experiences of children and have only literal meanings.

Although proponents of this model recognize that readers need vocabulary knowledge and skills of analysis and interpretation to understand advanced and specialized materials, they believe that the job of developing those skills properly belongs in subject matter classes. Getting students to understand the main idea of a short story, for example, is the business of the literature teacher, not the reading teacher, and is better left to middle and high school grades.

This model does not consider the factor of reader motivation. At all levels the reader is viewed as a passive recipient of content. Children should learn to read because adults want them to. They should remember the facts in a text and accept the teacher’s interpretation of meaning. Because of these beliefs, there are few attempts to make reading an interesting or rewarding experience for children.

Word Identification Plus Skills Model of Reading

In this model, learning to read is a two-tier process. The first tier is very much like that of the previous model, except that it defines reading as understanding words as well as pronouncing them. Children are able to read sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts by stringing together the pronunciations and meanings of individual words.

The second tier of the process is “reading to learn.” As readers gain speed and automaticity in recognizing words and verbalizing sentences naturally, they free up their mental abilities to deal with larger vocabulary loads and implied meanings. However, because this model, like the first, views readers as recipients of content, they need direct instruction in comprehension strategies. Through instruction, readers learn how to deal with different kinds of texts and their increasing length, complexity, and subtlety.

Reader motivation is a part of this model, but it is seen mostly as an external factor: What must the teacher do to move children to read this story and do the accompanying activities?

Integration of Language and Thinking Model of Reading

According to this model, children begin acquiring the knowledge and skills needed for reading long before they face the challenge of decoding print. Even at the earliest stages of reading, they are able to use what they know about language, literature, and the world to perform multiple operations in dealing with a text. Reading means not only recognizing words and knowing their meanings, but also understanding how they fit into a context of grammatical structure, speech phrasing and intonation, literary forms and devices, and print conventions.

Because readers bring their own skills and knowledge to any text, and because written language is redundant, they are able to orchestrate their own reading experiences. When one skill or knowledge source is weak in relation to a particular text, such as life experience would be in reading about the history of a foreign country, stronger skills, such as vocabulary, may carry the reader through. In this model, learning to read and reading to learn are inseparable.

Although this model also recognizes the need for reader strategies in dealing with more difficult texts, it views strategies as the products of individual needs and purposes, sometimes devised by the reader and sometimes prompted or provided by others at the point of need. Motivation, then, needs to be intrinsic. The teacher’s job is to create or allow situations where children want to read and are willing to work hard at it.

Learning to read in this model involves “others” in many ways. Readers expand their vocabularies and background knowledge through listening to the teacher read stories aloud and conversing with their peers. They adopt and adapt strategies modeled by others. They modify their understanding of texts by listening to what others have to say. At the same time, roles continually change: the questioner is questioned, and the explainer is corrected. Thus, social interaction is a necessary component of this model.

Appendix B

Below are two lists of topics not investigated by the National Reading Panel. The first is drawn from a survey of leaders in reading from across the United States done by the International Reading Association (Reading Today, December 1999). These leaders were asked to identify what topics they perceived to be “hot” in the field today. The second list is my own view of topics that teachers and parents are concerned about, either because they are now in wide use or are being advocated for inclusion in the reading curriculum.

International Reading Association List of “Hot” Topics

- Balanced reading instruction
- Decodable text
- Direct instruction
- Early intervention
- Performance assessment
- Standards
- State/national assessment
- Volunteer tutoring

My List of Topics of Public Concern

- Direct instruction
- Use of decodable texts
- Embedded skills instruction
- Reading aloud to children
- Invented spelling
- Use of predictable texts
- Early language development (vocabulary, grammar, and literary language)
- Integrated reading and writing
- Home-teaching programs
- Access to quality literature
- Whole-class instruction
- Scripted instruction
- Teacher modeling
- Children’s understanding of print conventions



Appendix C

Dear Panel Members:

I spent most of Friday and yesterday at the annual conference of the Oregon Reading Association. Although I was not scheduled to speak, I was introduced at the first general session as a member of the National Reading Panel (NRP). Because of that introduction, I was later approached by a number of teachers who thanked me for representing them and who expressed the hope that the Panel's report would relieve the pressure from the state legislature and local school boards to adopt one-sided commercial programs that would take away their authority to decide what is best for their students and that would consume most of the time allocated for reading over several years of schooling. I did not have the heart to tell them that the NRP Report would probably open the door to increased pressure rather than lessen it.

I was also engaged in conversation by two reading researchers who testified at the Panel's regional meeting in Portland in 1998. They called then for the inclusion of ethnographic research in the Panel's investigations and have since learned that it was not included. They could not see any logic or fairness in that decision. I did not tell them that their appeals at the Portland meeting and those of like-minded colleagues at other regional meetings were not even mentioned in the Panel's Executive Summary.

In addition, I attended a presentation by Patricia Edwards, a member of the International Reading Association (IRA) Board, who has done research on the effects of home culture on children's literacy development. She did not have to persuade me; this area of early language development and literary and world experience is the one I believe is most critical to children's school learning, and the one I could not persuade the Panel to investigate. Without such an investigation, the NRP Report's coverage of beginning reading is narrow and biased.

Over the past 2 months, I have wavered about whether it was useful or right for me to submit a minority report. I waver no longer. I hereby reiterate my request that the minority report I submitted in January and include in this e-mail (with minor revisions), be sent to Congress along with the majority report. Only in that way can I honorably serve the teachers and children I represent.

Joanne Yatvin

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